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Zeldin's Reorganization Plan Risks 'Generation Of Scientists,' Some Say

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EPA is poised to lose "an entire generation" of scientists and engineers, current and former staffers say in response to sweeping changes Administrator Lee Zeldin is making that include the expected closure of the Office of Research & Development (ORD) and reorganization of other offices, threatening morale, scientific integrity and institutional memory.

"We're not just losing staff -- we're losing an entire generation of scientists and engineers. Without them, we jeopardize scientific integrity and the very foundation of environmental protection in this country," Holly Wilson, president of AFGE Local 3347 representing EPA employees at Research Triangle Park (RTP), tells *Inside EPA*.

And Rich Engler, who worked in EPA's Office of Pollution Prevention & Toxics (OPPT) for 17 years and is now chemistry director at the Bergeson & Campbell law firm, tells *Inside EPA* there is "absolutely" a brain drain at EPA and while it is a longstanding concern, it is much more acute now.

A key driver, Engler and others say, is EPA's [broad reorganization plan](#), which seeks to disperse scores of ORD scientists to the Office of Chemical Safety & Pollution Prevention (OCSP) and the Office of Air and Radiation (OAR) to address pending backlogs.

Another 300 ORD scientists are slated to be sent to a new Office of Applied Sciences and Environmental Solutions (OASES) within the Office of the Administrator to "align research and put science at the forefront of the agency's rulemaking and technical assistance to states."

Critics have warned that housing research functions within the administrator's office will make it vulnerable to politicized micromanaging of science to support deregulatory conclusions.

In addition, Zeldin is planning [to overhaul OAR](#), announcing plans to reorganize the Office of Air Quality Planning & Standards (OAQPS), which does the bulk of the agency's rulemaking, and the Office of Atmospheric Protection.

According to initial plans, ORD's 1400 scientists have been invited to apply for 400 positions in other offices, with the remainder set to lose their jobs.

For now, the plan is on hold after a federal judge last week extended an existing block on the Trump administration's sweeping reorganization and downsizing at EPA and other federal agencies after finding that the president lacks authority to dramatically overhaul agencies enshrined in statute without Congress' consent -- though the Justice Department (DOJ) has quickly appealed the ruling.

"Agencies may not conduct large-scale reorganizations and reductions in force in blatant disregard of Congress's mandates, and a President may not initiate large-scale executive branch reorganization without partnering with Congress," Judge Susan Illston in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California wrote in her [May 22 order](#).

EPA spokeswoman Molly Vaseliou tells *Inside EPA* that she cannot comment given ongoing litigation, though she notes that ORD is not part of the reorganization announcement but declined to comment further given the ongoing litigation.

But Administrator Lee Zeldin in his [May 2 reorganization announcement](#) teed up expectations that ORD would shutter, saying the agency "is shifting its scientific expertise and research efforts to program offices to tackle statutory obligations and mission essential functions."

No Succession Plan

Engler and others say the reorganization plan appears to have been crafted without thought for preserving key scientific functions long-term.

For example, he says OPPT, which implements the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) program, has had "no succession plan."

Experienced workers have left, "with minimal effort" by managers to "capture that institutional knowledge."

He cites reports, including one issued in 2023 from [the EPA Inspector General](#) and [a 2025 Government](#)

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Accountability Office study, criticizing the OCSPP's New Chemicals Program for lacking a systematic and transparent process for conducting assessments and other work.

"I think everybody wants EPA to be well-informed and work on the best available science and that is hard to do with someone who is brand new" and has no experienced people to pass on knowledge, Engler says.

Additionally, he says the planned closure of EPA's ORD may not be lawful. For example, a reported plan to offer 130 ORD scientists positions in OCSPP raises questions about how those salaries will be paid and whether funding can be transferred from ORD to another office.

There are also questions about whether the expected higher level of the transferred ORD employees, at the GS 14 or 15 level, can move to positions that are slated for GS 12 or 13.

And despite claims by Zeldin that he is only getting rid of positions that lack statutory authority, Engler says ORD has legal duties.

For example, EPA is fulfilling its TSCA statutory mandate to reduce or eliminate vertebrate testing through the National Center for Computational Toxicology, a "critical" part of ORD. "What part of EPA is going to do this work? I have no idea," Engler says.

Further, ORD "doesn't just do blue sky research" but does work to support EPA's mission, including developing PFAS test methodologies used for regulatory compliance. There are "really critical pieces within ORD that EPA needs to support EPA" that should continue, he says.

"But I don't think anybody knows" that they will. Management has announced the plan to shutter the office "but hasn't figured out what the consequences" could be.

Deteriorating Morale

Wilson, the AFGE president at RTP, which houses large parts of ORD and OAQPS, says morale is deteriorating rapidly and "is at an all-time low."

"People are trying to stay focused, but the stress is immense. Despite it all, they're still working incredibly hard -- but you can feel the weight. It's like people are grieving the EPA they first joined, an agency with a mission that inspired them, one they are proud to serve and believed in with their whole hearts."

"These were dream jobs," she adds.

Another EPA source says the concern about losing the next generation of scientists and engineers is "grounded in the fact that job offers made to new hires were rescinded while early-career probationary workers were quickly terminated."

"And now we have more young folks that are at risk of being swept out of the agency" via likely reductions in force (RIFs.) "These folks were supposed to carry the agency's mission forward by replacing our senior experts. . . . And now because we don't have the young folks on board this is cutting off the pipeline and the agency is going to lose the opportunity for proper succession planning and knowledge transfer between the two generations."

This source says staff are still working but the atmosphere is "very, very disruptive. People are stressed, frustrated, angry and distracted. There is a lot of anxiety and we're not getting any answers. People are learning about" RIFs and office closures "in the press."

That is largely because these decisions are being made "outside of the agency and handed to the agency" instead of allowing senior managers to participate in decisions. "And the folks who are handing this stuff down have no idea how the agency works, no idea of the work we do and have done no analysis on the impacts of the cuts, RIFs or reorganizations."

For example, while RIFs are legal, "when you need to do them, there is a process that needs to be followed, including analysis. But this administration comes in and tears it all down in three months and can't even grasp what we do."

The Department of Government Efficiency came to RTP and then laid the plans, the source believes.

Still, the source calls the atmosphere "death by 1,000 cuts," noting that employees are also being subject to strict surveillance measures. "If your timecard says you are here and they don't catch a badge swipe or your laptop doesn't ping, you have to account for where you were," the source says.

Amidst all of this, staff are "writing the deregulatory rules," though others say the OAR restructuring plan **is likely to "disrupt" the deregulatory push** because both are being done simultaneously.

Lab Closures

One of the largest looming questions yet to be answered is what happens to ORD's laboratories, the EPA source says.

The Chapel Hill lab, where EPA conducts human exposure studies, is slated for closure, and there are other ORD labs in the RTP area.

“What will happen with them? We have labs with chemicals, biohazards, biologicals and animal waste and viruses, radioactive materials, controlled substances, live animals, compressed gases. This is just in RTP. What is going to happen with decommissioning the labs? There is no plan.”

EPA has about 13 other laboratories located across the country that house similarly dangerous materials.

ORD labs include the Center for Environmental Measurement & Modeling, the Center for Computational Toxicology & Exposure, the Center for Public Health & Environmental Assessment and the Center for Environmental Solutions & Emergency Response, according to [EPA's website](#).

Tracey Woodruff, who was a senior scientist in EPA's Office of Policy until 2022 when she joined the University of California-San Francisco, told a May 21 forum held by Democrats on the Senate Environment & Public Works Committee, that the ORD's work is crucial.

Its programs are run by “highly trained and experienced scientists with extensive and far-reaching responsibilities” and “affect the health of everyone in the United States.”

For example, ORD works with the Department of Homeland Security to monitor for cyberattacks on the nation's water systems, and had provided major grants to universities, though those have been terminated “without justification.”

She also raised significant concern about the loss of ORD's Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS), which provides regions and program offices with risk values that are crucial to cleanup and regulatory programs.

ORD's and IRIS' elimination “will undermine the development of new and updated chemical risk assessments” and may “lead to the use of biased corporate science in government decision making,” she charged.

“Eliminating the science will not make the harms go away. Closing offices will destroy decades of science. If Congress and the White House are serious about 'Making America Healthy Again,' they need to protect ORD and IRIS and increase their finding.” -- Dawn Reeves (dreeves@iwppnews.com)

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